Lessons Learned from UNICEF Field Programmes
For the Prevention of Recruitment, Demobilization and Reintegration of Child Soldiers

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**Introduction**

This paper will seek to present the main observations drawn from a lessons learned exercise based on recent UNICEF field programmes on the prevention of recruitment, demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers, with the ultimate goal of developing programme guidance for future actions to benefit children and women.

The exercise will identify the positive and negative results drawn from an analysis of country programme experiences, potential good practices based on best knowledge promoting the main guiding principles at the basis of UNICEF intervention such as non-discrimination, best interest of the child, right of expression, promoting equal rights of women and girls in a manner consistent with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Gaps that remain to be researched, the potential lack of consistency between policy and field practice and the need for new policies will also be identified.

The main focus will be the experience of seven African countries: Angola, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Sudan (OLS). Other country experiences have also been considered for this exercise such as Colombia, El Salvador, Sri Lanka and Uganda. The information will be based on an extensive review of existing research on child soldiers, as well as direct observations made during field visits to some of these countries.

The paper is divided into five main chapters. Chapter one provides an overview of the problem of child soldiers. Chapter two highlights UNICEF’s approach to the protection of children affected by armed conflict. Chapter three covers the main lessons learned on the prevention of recruitment of child soldiers. In chapter four, an effort will be made to explore preliminary considerations in advance of a formal demobilisation process. It will also attempt to describe UNICEF’s experience on demobilisation. The final chapter will present and discuss the issue of reintegration of child soldiers.

While we have attempted to cover key areas of importance on child soldier programmes, we are aware of the limitations of this working paper, which is the first attempt to draw on existing experience on child soldiers. Nevertheless, the paper should help spark ideas for new approaches, priority areas and directions for future programmes to benefit children and women.

The importance given to African countries in this paper is a direct reflection of the concentration of conflicts in the continent over the last decade. It also corresponds to a period when UNICEF began to play a key role in programmes related to child soldiers. In view of this, the capacity that has been developed in Africa needs to be carried out in other regions due to the universal nature of children’s participation in armed conflict.
1 The Problem of Child Soldiers

Definition of child soldier
A child soldier is any person under 18 years of age who, through whatever enlistment or recruitment procedure, forms part of any kind of regular or irregular armed force or group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers, and those accompanying such groups, other than purely as family members. It includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and forced marriage. It does not, therefore, refer exclusively to a child who is carrying or has carried arms. 1

Scale and geographic reach
Recent studies on child soldiers have demonstrated that the scale and geographic reach of the problem is greater than had been documented previously. 2 Today, as many as 300,000 children under the age of 18 serve in armed groups and national armed forces worldwide. 3 The participation of child soldiers has been reported in 33 current or recent armed conflicts in almost every region of the world. The incidence is highest in Africa and Asia followed by Latin America and Europe. Recent developments portray that the systematic use of children in conflict has become a norm rather than an exception.

In at least 26 of these conflicts, children under 15 have been used as soldiers, some as young as eight years old. The exact incidence rates are difficult to obtain because in many countries, accurate birth records are not kept, and children literally do not know their exact age.

The increasing use of child soldiers
The increasing use of child soldiers must be analysed within the framework of the evolving nature of armed conflicts. In today’s conflicts, ninety per cent of the victims are civilians; women and children are specifically targeted and major abuses of their rights occur such as rape, abduction, and forced recruitment. These abuses occur in situations of institutionalised chronic crisis where weak states are in a virtual stage of collapse and do not have the capacity to enforce their own legislation. Technological advances in weaponry have contributed to the increased use of child soldiers. Lightweight weapons are simple to operate, and can be used by children as easily as adults.

Why children participate in armed conflict
Many children join armed groups to escape poverty and the deteriorated economic and social conditions in which they live, as a result of social pressure, or because children believe that the group will offer food or security. Children are uniquely vulnerable to military recruitment because of their emotional and physical immaturity. They are easily manipulated and can be drawn into violence that they are too young to resist or understand. Others are forcibly recruited, “press-ganged”, a practice of mass abduction where military troops sweep young people in groups either off the streets or grab them at school and post them far from their home communities. The lack of birth certificate and identity records enables compulsory conscription by governments. Opposition groups...
often combine abduction with terror tactics calculated to make the community reject the child soldier.

Children are more likely to become child soldiers if they are poor, separated from their families, displaced from their homes, living in a combat zone or have limited or no access to education. Orphans and refugees are particularly vulnerable to recruitment. Children are recruited predominantly because of manpower shortages, not because they have special skills as fighters. The longer a conflict continues, the most likely it is that children will be recruited.

**The experience of child soldiers**

Regardless of being volunteers or forcibly conscripted, the experience of children participating in armed conflict is characterised by an accumulation of risk to their physical, emotional and social well-being. They are commonly subject to abuse; most of them have witnessed death, killing, and sexual violence. Many have participated in killings and if they survive the rigors and risks of combat, they may suffer severe long-term psychological consequences.

Children recruited by the military also include a large proportion of girls who are often sexually abused by the military. They remain the ‘invisible soldiers’ and poor attention has been given to their protection, demobilisation and reintegration.
2 UNICEF and the Protection of Children Affected by Armed Conflict

UNICEF was founded in the aftermath of the Second World War to provide emergency assistance to children affected by armed conflict. This role is no less relevant today, with children increasingly being the first to suffer in the growing number of conflicts, most often within States, between political, ethnic or religious factions, from village to village and street to street. Children have been involved in conflict not just as the primary targets of violence, but also as active participants.

UNICEF believes that the promotion of human rights and fundamental freedom goes hand in hand with the strengthening of international peace and security. In this regard, UNICEF proposed an Anti-War Agenda and supports the implementation of the recommendations of the UN Graca Machel Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. UNICEF will also continue to support the work of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict.

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At a recent meeting in the UN Security Council, UNICEF's Executive Director outlined a Peace and Security Agenda for Children which included the following elements:

- **End of use of children as soldiers**
- **Protect humanitarian assistance and humanitarian personnel**
- **Support humanitarian mine action**
- **Protect children from the effects of sanctions**
- **Ensure that peace-building specifically includes children**
- **Challenge the impunity of war crimes, especially against children**
- **Promote early warning and preventive action for children**

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UNICEF advocates to prevent children's involvement in conflict and to protect children in conflict situations in order to mitigate their impact on affected children. UNICEF:

- Believes it is urgent to impose a clear ban on children's recruitment, direct and indirect participation in hostilities below 18 years of age, regardless of whether they have been forced to join armed forces, or appear to have done so voluntarily, such prohibition must apply equally to government and non government forces; thus, UNICEF supports the adoption of an Optional Protocol to the CRC that would raise 18 years of age the minimum age for recruitment into armed forces and participation in hostilities;

- Wholeheartedly supports the UN position on establishing 18 as a minimum age for participation in UN peacekeeping operations and on recommending that this policy serve as an example for police and military forces worldwide;

- Recommends that in the case of already recruited children, all parties in conflicts must immediately demobilise them and ensure their psychological recovery and
social reintegration. UNICEF promotes and supports physical and psychosocial recovery and social reintegration as the pillar of all humanitarian assistance policy and programmes;

• Is committed to the rapid re-establishment of primary education in emergency situations, partly as an aim in itself and partly because relevant, quality education helps restore normality and enables children to cope better with stress. For children affected by armed conflict, education promotes healing and social reintegration, creating a sense of normality and purpose in their young lives and fostering tolerance and peaceful conflict resolution;

• Insists that children must always be identified as a distinct priority concern in all efforts to build peace and resolve conflict, whether as part of demobilisation mandates, observer missions or in concluding peace agreements;

• Believes that in peace agreements, the question of the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers must be systematically and seriously addressed. Peace agreements and peacekeeping operations must include full-fledged demobilisation programmes specifically designed for child soldiers. There must be aimed not only at reclaiming and destroying weaponry, but with providing former children soldiers with psycho-social support, material benefits and vocational alternatives;

• Recognises that preventing the recruitment of children or their demobilisation requires a long-term commitment to education, to vocational training attention to psycho-social needs and to reunifying children with their families;

• Stresses that early warning and preventive action for children must be promoted and supports the establishment of permanent, independent national institutions that will protect human rights and reinstitute the rule of law in the transition to democratic governance.

• Recommends that there must specialised child-rights training -and code of conduct- for all military, civilian and peacekeeping personnel, so that they will understand their legal responsibilities to all children -including the need to shield them for egregious violations of their rights;

• Strongly encourages the ratification of the Ottawa Convention on the prohibition of the use, stockpiling, production and transfer of antipersonnel landmines and supports the full implementation of the global ban on anti-personnel landmines;

• Encourages the dramatic reduction in the availability of small arms and light weapons, which only serve to sustain war and conflict - and whose portability is a major factor in the ease with which children are transformed into combatants;

• Believes that children must be protected from the effects of sanctions. In the interests of children, sanctions should not be imposed without obligatory, immediate and
enforceable humanitarian exemptions, along with mechanisms for monitoring their impact on children and other vulnerable groups. UNICEF stresses the need to design sanctions that directly affect the interests and practices of wrong-doers (i.e. members of the regime and its supporter), rather than children and other members of the civilian population who so often suffer the greatest negative effects.

- Considers unacceptable the impunity of war crimes, especially against children. Children's recruitment as members of armed forces, their rape and slaughter, and the targeting of their schools and hospitals are recognised by the International Criminal Court statute as heinous atrocities. Therefore, UNICEF strongly welcomes the establishment of the International Criminal Court, which will help bring to justice those who commit serious crimes against children.

The Geneva Conventions of 1949 and the Protocols thereto of 1977, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), provide the fundamental law and guiding principles underlying activities in favor of the demobilisation and reintegration of child combatants. The main provisions concerning child soldiers are stated in Article 4(c), Protocol II to the Geneva Conventions, article 77(2), 77(3), protocol I to the Geneva Conventions, and Articles 38 and 39 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. In accordance with the obligation under international humanitarian law, all measures must be taken to ensure the protection and care of children who are affected by armed conflict by:

- Taking all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take a direct part in hostilities.
- Supporting measures to promote the physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of any form of neglect, exploitation or abuse, torture or any form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment or armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment that fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.
- Supporting all aspects of demobilisation, reintegration and recovery of child soldiers.

**UNICEF’s involvement in** the demobilisation and social reintegration of child soldiers can be traced from January 1986 following the fall of Kampala, Uganda. This initiative may be considered the first time UNICEF carried out concrete practical interventions in implementing programmes for the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. For several years, the organisation’s response to the problem of child soldiers has depended on opportunities identified by country offices.

UNICEF has carried out a more systematic role and sometimes a leading role in the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers in Africa notably in Mozambique, Angola, Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. However, it is worth noting that the organisation has not played any significant role in Asia or Central America.
As part of its recent core corporate commitment to protect children in unstable environments, UNICEF will respond systematically to the issue of child soldiers by focusing on an integrated and coordinated response that emphasises preventive measures. UNICEF will also take the lead in promoting and implementing programmes aimed at the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. The posting of Child Protection Advisors in the newly established peacekeeping operations in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Sierra Leone, in close collaboration with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict, has been a first step in this direction.

2 Lessons Learned on Prevention of Recruitment
Recruitment encompasses compulsory, forced or voluntary recruitment into any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group.

**A two-pronged strategy**

A balanced approach to the prevention of recruitment embodies the improvement and implementation of international and national legal standards and instruments and the development of practical initiatives which respond to and are informed by the reality confronting the children, their families and communities. To ensure the protection of children, priority should be given to the implementation of preventive measures and activities at community and national level. This paper will therefore not address issues of improving standards at regional and international level.

**National legislation on recruitment**

It is part of UNICEF country offices' mandate to support government efforts to harmonise national legislation with the standards and principles defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Governments are urged to adopt national legislation on voluntary and compulsory recruitment with 18 years as the minimum age and establish proper recruitment procedures and the means to enforce them. This activity also includes supporting government efforts to ensure birth registration as well as the provision of identity documents to all children, particularly to those most at risk such as refugees and internally displaced children.

**Assessment and documentation**

An understanding of factors and dynamics leading to the participation of children in armed conflict is fundamental in eliminating child recruitment and informing programmes. Documentation on the involvement of children, as well as advocacy for their demobilisation and release should be carried out as early as possible throughout the armed conflict. Community efforts to this end should be supported.

An early assessment must aim at recognising the complexity of the factors which give rise to the participation of children in conflict, and in particular, cultural and ideological factors which influence "voluntary" recruitment. The assessment must take into account the political, social and economic factors that have influenced the process of the conflict, an understanding of the local context, and the resources available to protect children and secure their well-being.

The analysis developed from the assessment needs to go beyond the identification of broad issues such as non-access to education or poverty and identify the internal dynamics relevant in a specific context. This will be made possible through a constant reinforcement of UNICEF staff capacity to undertake accurate and on-going situation analysis identified as a priority during the Martigny Consultations of September 1998. This also outlines the need to rely on existing academic research or support further field research as well as better monitoring of projects.

**Identification of most vulnerable groups**
The most vulnerable groups should be identified through interviews and discussions with the children concerned, their families and the community, and where appropriate, the government.

Social factors that have proved to have an impact on child recruitment need to be systematically highlighted and correlated with the prevention of recruitment. This is particularly the case for most-at-risk children such as children in conflict zones; children separated from or without families; children in institutions; other marginalised groups such as street children, certain minorities, refugees and internally displaced, economically and socially deprived children.

In countries at war, this exercise will need to be improved to ensure that it constitutes the basis for the development of a strategy for prevention. Risk mapping, for example, represents an adequate means to identify the groups most at risk in particular situations. The exercise also needs to incorporate issues such as areas of concentration of fighting, the age and type of children being militarized and the main agents of militarisation; the fact that children in refugee or internally displaced camps are more at risk to fall under the influence of the military or be forcibly recruited. Other issues such as child labor, access to education, access to vocational training for adolescents, access to employment for youths and more critically the social status of youths need to be analyzed in terms of potential instability.

A focus on specific groups considered at risk complemented by an integrated approach to child protection issues may provide a more effective preventive monitoring or ‘early warning’ mechanism. However, it must be stressed that no single model can neither explain all the factors, nor outline a uniform procedure that will prevent child recruitment.

In most countries not directly involved in armed conflict, situation analysis reports prepared on regular basis by UNICEF offices need to incorporate the issue of child recruitment.

Some governments have developed an important propaganda around the issue of forced recruitment of children by armed opposition groups. In some cases, the objective is to deny legitimacy or representation to these armed groups. By relaying this kind of propaganda, there is a tendency to avoid developing an understanding of the factors leading to child recruitment as well as minimize the recruitment of children by government armed forces as in the case of Mozambique.

Prevention of recruitment is in many cases a cross-border issue requiring better coordination mechanisms among UNICEF field offices and between UNICEF and UNHCR. UNICEF regional offices need to play an active role in the coordination of such initiatives. Specific mechanisms need to be put in place to address regional issues such as the current Great Lakes crisis.
Monitoring of child recruitment
It is part of UNICEF’s mandate to monitor child rights abuses in armed conflict, and in particular, the recruitment of children and related practices. The on-going documentation must include militias or other armed groups, including private security forces established, condoned, or armed by the government. This principle has not been systematically enforced by field offices through the development of monitoring mechanisms or appropriate partnership with NGOs. However, potential good practices can be found in Sierra Leone and Burundi.

A network of local correspondents are documenting gross child rights violations committed during the conflict in Sierra Leone including the recruitment of children into armed groups. UNICEF has established a Secretariat in conjunction with the Church Council of Sierra Leone to monitor and report these violations. The main functions of the Secretariat are: data collection from network members; data processing and analysis; establishment of a confidential filing system; coordination and follow-up of publications; coordination of all training provided by and for the network; and technical assistance to network members on reporting procedures and process. UNICEF has provided funding for a Project Assistant who will support the Office Coordinator for the Secretariat. It has also provided financial and logistical support for the training of network focal points. The network has been a tool for educating the population at large on the rights of the child and the dangers violations represent for the life, health, growth and development of children.

In Burundi, the programme aimed at developing an ongoing process of monitoring and reporting on the situation of children in the country from a rights perspective. This was best achieved through the development of a network of partners at national, provincial and local level. The Child Rights Protection Committees worked to gather information on the situation of children according to criteria defined during a consultative process. The information gathered was to be included in the reports for each province and be used at provincial level to encourage greater protection of children by the local authorities and others. This process allowed a better understanding and articulation of the role of local communities, civil society and families in protecting their children.

During his visit to countries like Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Democratic Republic of Congo, the Special Representative to the Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict, Mr. Olara A. Otunnu, managed to obtain some commitment from government or armed opposition groups regarding the recruitment of children. Lack of clarity regarding the development of monitoring mechanisms with the UN agencies represented in the field such as UNICEF or UNHCR have not allowed to ensure proper follow-up of these commitments.

Recent examples in Europe have demonstrated that no country is de facto guaranteed against child recruitment on its own territory by foreign armed groups such as the PKK or the LTTE.
Advocacy
Prevention of recruitment is too often considered an advocacy activity of global nature and few countries have addressed the issue through their country programme. Good practices can be identified in Uganda and Sri Lanka.

In Uganda, UNICEF has carried out a multi-faceted campaign aimed at stopping the abduction of children by the Lord’s Resistance Army. Activities which were undertaken with a broad range of partners (governmental, non-governmental and inter-governmental) and targeted towards an equally broad range of potential actors at the national and international levels, included information gathering, publications, media work, work with the Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Commission on Human Rights and a great deal of ‘quiet diplomacy’. The Committee on the Rights of the Child referred to the plight of the children in its 1997 concluding observations and comments on Uganda. In 1998, the Commission on Human Rights adopted a formal resolution on the subject of the abducted children in Uganda. At national level, UNICEF has strengthened its contacts with the media to keep the issue of abductions current and commissioned the production of a 20-minute documentary on formerly abducted children. A system of collaboration has also been developed with local leaders and district officials in the five affected districts to establish and fully operationalise a documentation system on abducted children. Surveys were initiated and supported at district level to document these abductions and a computer programme developed to compile the collected information. UNICEF is currently working with the ‘Concerned Parents Association’, a lobby group formed by the parents of abducted children, to promote urgent action and to pursue national and international channels of contact and advocacy. The group has carried out a widespread campaign with the support of UNICEF to appeal to all parties involved, governments and the international community to exert influence on the LRA to stop the abduction of children and to obtain the immediate release of all children currently in captivity.

The concept of children as zones of peace exploits common concern on both sides of the conflict about the situation of children. In Sri Lanka, this concept has been operationalised through the creation of a national advocacy campaign that has attained wide national recognition. This entailed the development of a comprehensive communication and advocacy strategy such as printed material, mass media advertisements, training and conferences. Over 30 meetings were held including government officials, leaders of opposition groups, NGOs, religious and community leaders, academics and professionals. UNICEF widely distributed a document ‘call for action’, which transforms the UN Graca Machel Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children into a set of principles and recommended activities in the specific context of Sri Lanka.

Giving a voice to children: the case of Colombia
UNICEF has supported children’s participation in the mobilisation for children’s peace and rights in various ways in Colombia. There has been the continuous training and sensitisation of children on their rights and responsibilities in schools through radio, television and printed media or directly through collaboration with NGOs. To provide children with an opportunity to express their opinion about the war in their country and how it affects their lives, UNICEF supported the organisation of a symbolic election carried out by children to select the rights that they consider most relevant. Some 2.7 million children voted on 25 October 1996 in some 300 of the 1050 municipalities in Colombia. UNICEF, together with 400 NGOs and with
Engagement with non-states parties
Developing relationships and "quiet diplomacy" with government armies and opposition armed groups is key to ensure the protection of children. UNICEF needs to extend the promotion of written agreements between or with all parties to the conflict which include a commitment on the minimum age of recruitment.

The Ground Rules programme in OLS - Sudan represents a good example of engagement with non-state parties. The drafting and signing of a new set of ground rules with the three main rebel movements, the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM), the South Sudan Independence Movement (SSIM) and the Sudan People’s Liberation Movement (SPLM United) entailed a commitment by all three Movements to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, the Geneva Conventions as well as to a statement of humanitarian principles which includes neutrality, impartiality, the right to humanitarian assistance, accountability and transparency. Following the signing, UNICEF and the Movements initiated a joint dissemination and advocacy programme in form of workshops, seminars and training, to promote humanitarian principles at all levels of southern Sudanese society – political, military, church leaders, women’s leaders, local NGO’s as well as international organisations
The development of strong partnerships are crucial for the prevention of child recruitment into armed groups. In particular, a close collaboration with the ICRC is essential and needs to be strengthened. The ICRC often has access to information about the use of child soldiers that no other humanitarian or human rights organisation may have and therefore an extremely important partner in efforts to improve programmes and advocacy in this area. The ICRC and UNICEF hold regular high level consultations to strengthen their partnership and enhance mutual understanding between the two organisations. On the question of child soldiers, both organisations committed to identifying a few key countries in which they could work together for the prevention of recruitment and demobilisation of child soldiers.

Practical measures to protect children

Based on the identification of the most vulnerable groups through a situation analysis, practical protection measures are required to prevent recruitment of children. This is particularly the case for unaccompanied children, street children and children in camps for refugees and internally displaced persons. All efforts should be made to keep or reunite children with their families or place them within a family structure.

Programmes for unaccompanied children and other groups of children in need of special protection measures are rarely correlated with the need to protect the children from recruitment into armed forces.

From 1997-99, the Child Protection Programme in Sierra Leone offers a remarkable example of an effective response to ensure the best possible protection in the worst situation. Programmes for children released from the military and other groups of unaccompanied children were designed to take into account the risk factors linked to the armed conflict. In this case, children were not concentrated in institutions which could have represented potential targets for armed groups but dispersed through a network of foster families organised by national NGOs, and in particular religious organisations. Whenever the zone of residence was under direct attack and when conditions permitted, the children were moved to safer area.

The Cape Town Principles stressed that the international community should recognise that children who leave their country of origin to avoid illegal recruitment or participation in hostilities are in need of international protection. This includes children who are not nationals of the country in which they are fighting.

Some of the core UNICEF programmes are essential in preventing the recruitment of children. Programmes geared towards access to education, vocational training and income-generating activities should be promoted for all children.

Dissemination of standards to civilian population

It is essential to inform the civilian population about existing standards, on the risk of recruitment and the ways to resist it, particularly children and adolescents at risk of recruitment, their families and those organisations working with them. Local human rights organisations, the media, former child soldiers, and teachers, health workers,
church leaders and other community leaders can play an important advocacy role. More efforts are required from UNICEF programmes to move beyond rhetoric to the identification of practical protection mechanisms. This will be accomplished only after the issue and its complexity are fully understood and the issue incorporated as programme priority.

Sustainable initiatives which recognise the central role of the family and community in protecting children are also essential. Dialogue must be engaged with communities affected by armed conflict to identify practical means to translate these requirements into practice. Community efforts to prevent recruitment should be developed and supported. Traditional mechanisms of protection for children at risk of recruitment need to be identified and the capacity of communities to implement such mechanisms must be reinforced.

Programmes aiming at preventing recruitment should promote the participation of children. This should be sustained through engaging in dialogue with children and young people on the issue of violence. This can be incorporated in peace education programmes in response to the expressed needs and aspirations of the children.

A central part of any preventive strategies will be to inform children of their rights. This should be complemented by practical activities which ensure their engagement in the definition and development of alternative strategies to recruitment. The development of alternative models to the glorification of war particularly by the media must be promoted.

There is a need to establish a dialogue between the government and communities on the importance of ensuring an 18-year limit for recruitment in areas where children are regarded as adults before they attain the age of 18 years.

Government representatives, military personnel and former opposition leaders can be instrumental in advocating, negotiating and providing technical assistance to their counterparts in other countries in relation to the prevention of recruitment, demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers.
3 Lessons Learned on Demobilisation

Demobilisation means the formal and controlled discharge of soldiers from any armed group or force. All persons under the age of 18 years should be demobilised from any kind of regular or irregular armed force or armed group.

A Preliminary considerations in advance of the formal demobilisation process

Children should always be identified as an explicit priority in all peace-building and conflict resolution efforts, both as part of the peace agreement and the DDR mandate. Child-specific components of the DDR programme must be an integral part and not an appendix to the central DDR programme.

The parties’ reticence to acknowledge their own child soldiers can result in a failure to develop programmes for child soldiers. This dynamic must be foreseen to ensure the recognition and attention to child soldiers throughout the conflict and the peacemaking process. During 1992-94 in Mozambique, the exclusive focus by the international community on the situation of children recruited by RENAMO prompted the government armed forces to deny the presence of children in its rank.

DDR exercises should be designed in cooperation with UNICEF and other relevant UN agencies and NGOs with expertise in this field. Child-specific components of DDR must be planned, executed and evaluated within the framework of the central DDR committees and monitoring bodies of the peace agreements. Throughout this process, inter-agency forums should remain constantly appraised on how all former combatants’ needs are being addressed and where weak spots need support.

Experience in Liberia demonstrates that insufficient consideration given to the preparation of a demobilisation plan for the children, partly justified by limited resources, leads to a quick and disorganised demobilisation exercise which does not guarantee the essential rights and protection of children. In this case, skepticism and withholding of resources seriously undermined preparation for the demobilisation of child soldiers inevitably leading to flawed implementation. Child care agencies were forced to give up their best-case scenarios to do a good job under extreme constraints. In particular, the lack of political will and resources for encampment meant that plans to hold children long enough to assess their condition were gradually scaled back to a degree that only a fraction of the children – those who declared themselves unaccompanied – could be accommodated. This left the vast majority of children vulnerable to the very commanders who initially recruited them. In this way, the goal of demobilisation to break the command structure and facilitate reintegration was seriously undermined.

No conditions should be attached to the demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers. This should prior to the signing of any peace agreement. Children must be demobilised whether they hand back weapons or not.
Programme agencies should have clear ideas as to what an appropriate reintegration package for children might comprise, if one is to be made available at all. Programmers must ensure that child soldiers’ particular needs are met in a way that does not create fear and resentment to their communities and society. The perception that the children are getting “special” or “privileged” treatment should be avoided. The likelihood of a family or community rejecting a former child soldier must be foreseen and integrated into planning.

Planning must begin early to construct reintegration programmes that can replace the economic incentive of war for child soldiers while avoiding the creation of false expectations that might result in frustration and recurrence of violence.

The preparation of demobilization programmes must be used as an opportunity to promote and enforce the provision of the Convention on the Rights of the Child which constitute the guiding principles in all actions to protect the rights and welfare of child soldiers. The implementation of these principles must be based on the recommendations of the UN Graca Machel Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children. In particular, attention should be given to the principles of non-discrimination, gender equity, non-institutionalization and non-stigmatization of children and priority given to family reunification, gender-equity and right to participation.

In all stages of demobilisation and reintegration, children must be consulted to ensure that strategies and programmes reflect their needs and concerns. In particular, children should participate in determining their future with regard to issues of family reunification, vocational or educational opportunities.

There is a need to ensure that the rights of both present and former child soldiers are respected by the media, researchers and others at all times. The code of conduct developed by UNICEF for journalists must be enforced in order to prevent the exploitation of child soldiers by the media. The adaptation of this code to local conditions should take into account of inter alia, the manner in which sensitive issues are raised, the child's right to anonymity and the frequency of contact with the media.

The first step in the social reintegration process should be the design of the demobilization project. Demobilisation cannot be reduced to a formal exercise consisting of surrendering a weapon in order to get access to a benefits package. Demobilisation is a process whose ultimate goal is to ensure the social reintegration of children affected by armed conflict.

UNICEF and its partner agencies should ensure that measures are in place to protect the children during demobilization in order to prevent re-recruitment and retaliation by armed forces.

**Early commitment**

It is necessary to ensure that the impact of armed conflict on children particularly their participation in the armed conflict are raised and acknowledged at the earliest possible
stage in anticipation of peace negotiations. These issues, in particular, the issue of the
recruitment of children must be included in peace treaties and subsequent demobilization
processes. Peace agreements and related documents should acknowledge that children
have participated in armed conflict where applicable. Failure to get their participation
acknowledged at an early stage can lead to their exclusion from the demobilization
exercise, as demonstrated in the case of El Salvador in 1992.

In the anticipation and at the beginning of peace negotiations, preparations should be
made to cater for children who will be demobilized. This includes the following:
- preparing an initial situation analysis and needs assessment of children and their
  communities;
- negotiating guarantees for direct and free access to all child soldiers to relevant
  authorities or organizations responsible for collecting information concerning their
  demobilisation and implementation of specific programmes;
- preparing a strategic planning including the mobilization of contingency resources;
- ensuring coordination between all parties to avoid duplication and gaps;
- incorporating and strengthening existing capacities to respond where there is access
  to local and government structures;
- ensuring training of staff who will be involved in the process;
- organizing logistic and technical support in collaboration with partner agencies
  responsible for the formal demobilization process.

The need to prepare contingency plans for the demobilization of child soldiers can be
justified by the situation in countries like the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1997
where the demobilisation of some groups of children was decided on an ad-hoc basis by
regional military authorities without preliminary consultation of UN and NGO partners
and with little or no preparation. In this case, UNICEF Kinshasa was able to respond
efficiently to three provincial initiatives for demobilisation of children. However, the
failure to address the issue at central level concurred to the interruption of the programme
after the deterioration of military conditions.

Access to child soldiers during the preparation of a demobilization process is essential to
ensure that they are consulted and their opinion is taken into account. In Mozambique,
following the granting of access to children by RENAMO, children were interviewed in
the military bases where they were confined, and the demobilization plan was reviewed
to take into consideration their desire to be reunited with their family without delay.

The preparation of an initial situation assessment is essential to ensure that programmes
respect and enforce the best interest of the child. In many countries, demobilisation of
child soldiers has recently become a government initiative representing an opportunity to
attract donor funds. In some cases, military commanders seek temporary shelter for
soldiers they are not able to feed with the intention of recruiting them again when the
need arises. In other cases, children who have never been in the armed forces get
involved in demobilisation programmes as it seems to have been the case for a large
proposition of children in Rwanda. Children can also be deemed orphans without prior
investigation of their real family situation.
Need to strengthen collaboration with DPKO
UNICEF must play a leading role to ensure that child related issues are fully taken into account in the preparation of demobilisation plans. It requires a clear commitment to develop training programmes for peacekeepers on child protection issues. Recent developments in the collaboration between UNICEF and DPKO represent an important step to promote the protection of children. UNICEF has been involved in the development of training modules for peacekeepers on gender issues, child rights, humanitarian principles. The recent posting of Child Protection advisors within DPKO will ensure that children will be kept high in the agenda at all stages of the disarmament and demobilisation process. In the case of Mozambique, the specific reintegration programme for child soldiers developed by UNICEF under DHA’s umbrella was not properly disseminated among DPKO officers in charge of the demobilisation centers. This resulted to the involvement of children adult demobilisation programme. In certain situations, the sensitisation of police and local authorities is essential. The need to sensitise military personnel on child-related issues must in most cases be extended to political and local authorities.

B No conditionality to child demobilisation

Amnesty for child soldiers
Children who have participated in hostilities must be protected by an amnesty or specific judiciary process that will recognise them as children who have been abused during the conflict. Illegally recruited children who leave the armed forces or armed groups at any time should never be considered as deserters. Child soldiers retain their rights as children.

Children can be demobilised in the absence of a demobilisation process
Children who leave any armed force or group by escaping or as a result of being captured or wounded during on-going conflict have special needs for protection which must be addressed. These children have the right to be demobilised before the end of the conflict even in the absence of an on-going demobilisation programme. UNICEF is responsible for ensuring the implementation of appropriate programmes for these children.

Case studies in Sri Lanka and Sierra Leone demonstrate that there exist opportunities to demobilise children such as prisoners of war, children surrendering themselves or through agreement with some military commanders. The activities must take into account the security of the children in the midst of the ongoing conflict. This means the dispersion of the children, transfer from their commander’s zone of control and the capacity to move them out of a combat zone. Sierra Leone represents the best potential practice of the implementation of negotiations to release and demobilise children during the worst period of war.

Separate demobilisation of children and disarmament
Most formal demobilisation programmes are seen as opportunities to disarm factions (one man/one gun). In countries such as Liberia and Angola, this procedure has worked
against the best interest of the children. Most military factions tend to retain a stock of weapons and deprive children of the possibility to get access to the demobilisation process. The frustration and feelings of injustice experienced by the children can drive them directly back to military life. It must also be noted that girls are often excluded in this process.

**Specific demobilisation process for children**

During demobilisation, the most efficient way to protect children from further abuse is to immediately separate them from adult soldiers. For many years, this principle has been promoted with some success by UNICEF in collaboration with other organisations and NGOs. Specific demobilisation processes are now being designed for children and UNICEF is regularly taking the lead in coordinating the protection and provision of services to children. This was particularly the case in Angola, Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

Children have different needs. Family reunification and community reintegration must be given a priority in consultation with the children. For the most part, only a fraction of child soldiers are integrated in effective programmes of demobilization and subsequent reintegration. There is a need to ensure that strategies for demobilisation address the needs of all ex-child soldiers including both those formally demobilised through encampment, and those returning directly to their community when an opportunity arises.

To guarantee a specific process of demobilisation for children, coordination mechanisms must be reinforced with organizations in charge of the demobilisation process. During the demobilisation exercise in Mozambique, about fifty per cent of the RENAMO child soldiers were demobilised with adult soldiers. An analysis of the situation demonstrated that there had not been any liaison between the humanitarian agencies including UNICEF and DPKO officers in charge of demobilisation centres. This was as a result of disagreement on criteria to determine the age of the combatants. Furthermore, no guidelines were established to separate the children resulting to the registration of all combatants by DPKO officers.

**Priority to children demobilisation**

In any demobilisation process, priority should be given to children. Several demobilisation exercises such as those in Angola and Mozambique which incorporated this principle failed to enforce it. In general, the modalities for the demobilisation of children should be negotiated simultaneously with procedures developed for other vulnerable groups such as soldiers with disability and female soldiers. In many cases, children are considered only after the modalities for demobilisation of the core groups of soldiers have been agreed upon. This can lead to up to 18 months of delay in the release of children from the armed forces.

**Gender equity**

In some countries, girls represent up to forty per cent of the child soldiers. Demobilisation programmes tend to ignore the existence of girl soldiers and very often focus on the needs of boys. The potential existence of girl soldiers should be systematically assessed in line with the UNICEF definition of child soldiers including the
different ways in which boys and girls “serve armies” - as fighters, cooks, messengers, spies, to perform labor and as sexual slaves.

Girl soldiers need to be systematically targeted as a priority group. In particular, programmes should be developed for the assessment of the girls' health.

C  Design the demobilisation exercise as the first step in the reintegration process

Protection of children during demobilisation
UNICEF’s role is to ensure that measures are in place to protect the children during demobilisation in order to prevent their re-recruitment by armed forces or retaliation against them. Programmatic implications lie in securing confidentiality of information, avoiding unnecessary documentation of children’s military life and experience of war, effective separation from their previous military chain of command (this would require in some cases their integration into a fostering center before family or community reintegration). It means also that the factors leading to child recruitment (social or economic) must have been clearly analysed and integrated in the demobilisation process. Services provided to the children must be consistent and represent a viable alternative to military life.

To ensure security, assembly areas must be far from the conflict zones. Potential problems that increase the risk for children should be carefully analysed and appropriate solutions and responses provided. For example, some children may not be able to go home after formal demobilisation therefore needing short term accommodation. Some areas may be inaccessible for tracing and families of some children may be in camps for refugees or internally displaced persons.

When the demobilisation process is kept under the control of belligerents, the protection of the children is not secured. During the demobilisation exercise in 1996-97 in Angola, the UN engaged the active support of UNITA commanders in each quartering area. UNITA commanders accompanied each soldier’s registration interview were employed for the health posts and for water and sanitation jobs. UNITA commanders determined who participated and when in the various health and civic education courses and other recreational activities. For the child soldiers, all training and transportation planning depended on information gathering within the quarters. UCAH assigned a special team of three UN volunteers who had to rotate among the 15 quarters to work with UNITA assistants on special interviews of the children. Language problems undermined the possibility of gaining accurate information on the children. The UNITA assistants serving as interpreters and selected by UNITA commanders regularly changed information on the children’s age, name and chosen destination. Children were often hit or beaten in front of the UN and humanitarian workers for telling the interviewer that they were told to say something or for contradicting the information the UNITA assistant gave the interviewer. Many children in fact gave false information when they would to UNITA commanders and international humanitarian staff alike in their own system of
self-protection. The failure to address the immediate protection of the children facilitated de facto the forced re-recruitment of children by UNITA.9

The demobilisation exercise in Liberia also provides some useful lessons. Insufficient protection measures during the demobilisation led to the immediate reintegration of many children within the armed forces. For example, of the 797 children who declared themselves unaccompanied in 1996, 330 chose to leave the demobilisation sites on their own. They are presumed to have either gone back to their commanders or found their own way to a relative or friend. With neither encampment, transport nor escorts available to take the children to their final destination, the vast majority – about 89 percent – of the children simply wandered away from the demobilisation sites. In many cases, the children as well as the adults, immediately returned to their commander.

The duration of stay at the encampment site should be as short as possible
Children should be evacuated from encampment sites as soon as possible. The process of documentation at the encampment site should be reduced to 48 hours after which the children should be transferred to an interim care site or centre under civilian control. Essential services such as health, counseling, psychosocial support should be provided to the children at the civilian interim care site.

The period of stay at the encampment site should not be confused with the period of access to it. Short periods of access to encampment sites such as one week in Liberia or three weeks in Angola proved to be detrimental to children.

Human dignity and confidentiality
The human dignity of the child and the need for confidentiality should be taken into account in the demobilisation process. There is a need to ensure that adequate time and appropriate personnel have been considered to make children feel secure and comfortable so that they are able to receive information and share their concerns. Wherever possible, the staff dealing with the children should be nationals of the country in conflict.

Screening and documentation
At assembly or demobilisation sites, children should be interviewed to enable the collection of basic data on their health, educational background, aspirations, family members. Documentation of their experience in war must be avoided. In essence, former child combatants should be issued identity cards in the beginning of the demobilisation process (or earlier if they enter a spontaneous demobilisation process). Systems should be designed to analyse and store the data on each child and to enable continuous reporting on the progress of the demobilisation effort.

Interview with the children
Children should be interviewed individually and away from their superiors and peers. It is not appropriate to raise sensitive issues in the initial interview. If these issues are raised subsequently, it must be done only in the best interest of the child, and by a competent
Confidentiality must always be respected. All children should be informed on reasons for collecting the information and on the confidentiality of the process. Children should be further informed on what will happen to them at each step of the process. Wherever possible, communication and information should be in the mother tongue of the children.

Staff employed to work with the demobilisation process should receive special training on data collection, interview techniques, and on the sensitisation to the particularities of child combatants.

Child soldiers may not want to reveal their place of origin and intended resettlement destination for fear of re-recruitment or reprisals. If the parties to the conflict are not committed to the demobilisation process, they might create obstacles to tracing and reunification in areas they control. Under such circumstances children will probably not wish to return home to areas controlled by one or another faction. Children who do return to conflict areas are also difficult to monitor and protect.

**Health issues**

**During** the demobilisation process, all children should undergo assessment of their physical health and receive necessary treatment as soon as possible. Encampment affords an opportunity to pay special attention to the physical, emotional, psychosocial and social needs of girl soldiers as well as girls who participated in armed groups or forces in capacities other than combatants. Their needs should be borne in mind when planning for encampment facilities and staff.

Specific responses are also needed for children with disabilities, child soldiers with children of their own, children with sexually transmitted diseases, etc. There is little or no available data on the types of injuries specific to child soldiers as distinct from child victims of war. Linkages between the demobilisation programme and existing programmes for dealing with children’s health needs should be ensured.

The most frequent injuries suffered by child soldiers are loss of limbs, **sight and hearing**. **While** taking into account that programmes of demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers usually attract more resources than regular programmes of child protection, it must be stressed that there is a unique opportunity to develop pilot projects to **identify** tools to be used in regular UNICEF programmes. The resources should be used as an opportunity to develop comprehensive pilot programmes of assistance to children disabled by armed conflict. **This includes** combining the provision of prosthetics with psycho-social support, family strengthening, community mediation, integration in the regular school system, appropriate skills training and access to micro-credit.

**Drug abuse**

Drug abuse is common among combatants in certain conflicts and staff with relevant expertise is required during the DDR to ensure that children with drug dependencies are assessed and provided rehabilitative services.

**Demobilisation package**
For many years, humanitarian organisations remained unclear about benefits to be given to children during demobilisation. The intention has been to avoid providing a reward which would be interpreted as an incentive for more children to participate in future armed conflicts. This may lead to discrimination against children in the distribution of demobilisation services and benefits such as access to the distribution of family kits in El Salvador or the 18-months cash payment in Mozambique. Experience has shown that in such cases, there is a great potential for the children to express their frustration by returning to the armed forces, even when they had earlier been forcibly recruited.

Most organizations have now agreed in the principle that the demobilisation package for children must be of a long-term sustaining nature rather than in the form of an immediate reward, and that the implications of the nature of the package for future recruitment of children must be taken into account. Despite relative facility to mobilize donor resources on a short-term basis, there remains a limited capacity to ensure matching services and benefits for children as compared to those provided to adult soldiers.

**Need to ensure rupture with military life**
Some demobilisation exercises are conducted by the Ministry of Defense or a Demobilisation Commission where the military plays a key role. This often leads in to situations where the children continue to be fostered in a military environment. Demobilisation exercises should not be used as a means to support the establishment of cadet military academies.

**Ensure that re-recruitment does not occur**
Any assembly area must be sufficiently far from the conflict zones to ensure security for the children. The likelihood of re-recruitment can be reduced if children are returned to their caregivers as soon as possible and under conditions of safety. Children need to be informed of their rights to avoid recruitment and where children have been formally demobilised, others must be informed.

*As part of the legal framework adopted on child soldiers in Angola, a provision was made aimed at ensuring that child soldiers would not be subject to Angola’s compulsory military service regime, for example, when reaching the legal age for recruitment. A similar proposal was made in Mozambique but rejected by the government.*

**Contingency planning**
Programme agencies must have contingency plans in case of a failed demobilisation process. Contingency plans should protect demobilised children from the risk of re-recruitment should violence recur and from the risk of retaliation from former foes once they return to their communities. This might require follow-up well beyond the close of the formal demobilisation process.

**Demobilisation and reintegration programmes should systematically include prevention activities**
**This includes** analysing each situation and identifying the main risk factors and the most vulnerable groups, reinforcing the engagement of the different parties to the conflict or the peace process, developing monitoring mechanisms and awareness-training at community level. The development of such activities is essential to guarantee the success of demobilisation and reintegration programmes.

Parallel plans must be made to document, track and provide support for an approximate thirty per cent of the child combatants who routinely do not enter the formal DDR process because they escaped an armed group, were released in advance or returned spontaneously to their community.
5 Lessons Learned on Reintegration

Reintegration programmes are comprehensive and aim at providing children with an alternative to military life. Peacemakers, donors and child advocates should agree on how much reintegration assistance is adequate or appropriate for former child soldiers; to what end, in what form and for how long it should be provided, and how it will be funded.

The principles of action must be based on the needs of the children and those of their families and communities. Policies and strategies to address the situation of demobilized child soldiers should be developed and implemented on the basis of an assessment of the impact of the conflict on children and their families.

Programmes must promote the best interest of the child. They should seek to enhance the self-esteem of the children, promote their capacity to protect their own integrity and to construct a positive life. Activities must take into account the age and the stage of development of the child and accommodate the particular requirements of girls and children with special needs. Programmes can only develop through relationships of trust and confidence. They require adequate time and a commitment of resources to necessitate a close and on-going cooperation between all actors.

Interim care and rehabilitation centres
The widely held view is that children should be reunited with their families and communities as soon as possible since they hold the best resources for dealing with reintegration and rehabilitation. Nevertheless, there is a debate over whether to send child soldiers home as soon as family members are located and have expressed willingness to receive the child. In such a case, all support should ideally be channelled through the families and communities. However, others contend that there might be greater benefits to providing the former child combatant with a stable and protected interim environment within the demobilisation process, before family reunification. A brief period of stay in an interim care center would arguably enable treatment of particular health problems and identification of any other special needs. It would also give time to begin to break ties to a military hierarchy and command structure, as well as time to conduct family and community sensitisation.

The decision to implement a rehabilitation centre should be based on a careful assessment of the need for such services, taking into account previous experiences. The first experience of demobilisation and reintegration of child soldiers was developed around
transit centres where children were provided with individual psychological support. Experience has shown that the creation of such centres is not always required and in which case, family reunification and community reintegration need not be delayed.

Rehabilitation centres often present weak or counter-productive aspects. These centers tend to develop ‘institutional diseases’ since they provide better living conditions and education and vocational training than those provided in the children’s community of origin. There have been many cases of children refusing to be reunified with their families or communities in order to continue to benefit from the rehabilitation centres. Some of the centres have encouraged de facto families to abandon their own children in situations where they cannot ensure proper care for the children. Artificial environments delay reintegration into community of origin and almost systematically prolong the period of stay in the center than originally planned. These centers can be easily targeted for forced recruitment or abduction of children. They are also rarely established in rural areas and are very often too far away from the communities of reintegration of the children. Distance does not allow families to visit their children or become involved in the activities of the centre. Some of these centers lack the expertise to conduct family tracing activities and often do not consider family reunification as their main priority of intervention. Also, very little support is provided to prepare families to receive the children.

Activities aiming at facilitating the social reintegration of the children become ends in themselves. Education and vocational training are developed as a means to assist children to adjust to new situations. However, when they take a life of their own they may become detrimental to the initial objective of social reintegration. Facilities can be inadequate leading to poor hygiene or limited play grounds. The staff is very often inadequately trained on child development, counseling or child rights issues. Traditional coping mechanisms such as the participation of traditional healers are rarely integrated into the activities of the center. Due to high operational costs, sustainability of such centres cannot be secured over time.

Nevertheless, in some cases, as demonstrated in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Uganda, the creation of rehabilitation centres responds to acute needs in terms of protecting the children during a sensitive transitory period. They provide shelter and many services to the children including psychosocial counseling. In comparison to foster families, there is less gross abuse and discrimination of the children in transit centers. The rehabilitation centers act as magnet and incentive for abducted or forcibly recruited children to escape and seek assistance as demonstrated by the psychosocial programme in Uganda. This is sometimes the only way to identify these children and to provide them with care and protection. They provide a secure environment to girls who have generally been sexually abused, as they need special support including community sensitization before reintegration in their community of origin. These centers allow the conduct of a proper assessment of the children’s needs, in particular, their need for psychological support.

*TEXT BOX
A potential good practice can be found with the Joseph Brethren initiative in Liberia. The church-based centre only deals with a category of young people who cannot be reintegrated due to rejection by their community of origin. These include ex-child soldiers who committed atrocities in their own community and girls who were forced to serve as sexual partners for combatants. In this case, the counselors are selected from the community and benefit from an intensive eight-week training. Each counselor is assigned to work full time with one child. During an average eight to ten weeks stay in the centre (one for boys and another one for girls), these young people are resocialised in terms of behavior, hygiene, self-confidence, capacity to verbalize, counseling, literacy, and eventually some pre-vocational training. The youths are also requested to participate in a project benefiting the community such as the rehabilitation of a health-post or a school. In the mean time, the church leaders develop some sensitisation work in the community. Elders are invited to the center to discuss traditional issues, the way of life and shared values in the community. Sessions of dances and songs are also organised. The process culminates in a traditional ceremony where the young people acknowledge the harm they have committed and request to be forgiven by the community. This has proved to be grounded on traditional values that when forgiveness is required in the proper manner it cannot be denied. The centre represents a unique opportunity for reintegration in the community for many of the most affected youths, particularly the girls.

It must be stressed that such centres should never become an obstacle to or a matter of delaying family and community reunification and reintegration when conditions are created for it. In certain circumstances, as illustrated by Liberia and Sierra-Leone, a clear commitment must be taken to develop preliminary activities such as advocacy with communities, reconciliation procedures to create the conditions for reunification and reintegration of the children.

**Family reunification**

Family reunification is the principal factor in effective social reintegration. It often corresponds to the main desire of children. In Mozambique, more than ninety per cent of the children interviewed in RENAMO bases before the start of the demobilization exercise expressed reunification with their family as their first choice. Ex-child soldiers interviewed about their own experience of demobilisation and reintegration in 1988 in El Salvador acknowledged the reunification with their family as the main facilitating factor in their reintegration. This example is particularly relevant because family reunification was not part of the services provided to ex-child soldiers in El Salvador and many children revealed that the process had been difficult.

For family reunification to be successful, special attention must be paid to re-establishing the emotional link between the child and the family prior to, and following return. Where children have not been reunited with their family, their need to establish and maintain stable emotional relationships must be recognized. Institutionalisation should only be used as a last resort, and for the shortest possible time while efforts to identify family-based solutions continue.
Programmes must consider that the overall context for the child **soldiers** return will be characterised by a situation of increased impoverishment of their families. The UN Graca Machel Report on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children outlined the linkage between education, employment opportunities, and the economic security of the child soldiers families as factors that would determine not only successful social reintegration, but also prevent re-recruitment. The requirement for children, of whatever age, to contribute to the family economy may constitute the most important factor in their re-attachment to their families, thereby defining effective social reintegration.

**Strengthening community capacity to care and protect children**
Programmes should be developed in collaboration with communities of origin building on existing resources and taking into consideration the context and community priorities, values and traditions. There is a need to engage a dialogue with communities to understand their main concerns for children and the perception of their own roles and responsibilities towards those children. Assistance should not focus on the child alone since it is necessary to consider the child in the context of his or her community.

Communities must also be assisted in the preparation to receive the children. Factors conducive to the reintegration of the children must be assessed and awareness sessions strengthening community capacity to care and protect the children must be organized. Practical guidelines remain to be developed on these issues.

**Community-based rehabilitation**
In some cases, community-based rehabilitation may represent an alternative to rehabilitation centres. However, this alternative is hampered by certain issues. There is a fairly limited number of trained community counselors to provide adequate support and follow-up. These programmes are very often based on foster care lacking proper supervision and often become bases for the sexual exploitation of children. The issue of the financial retribution to the community counselors and foster care parents remains a controversial issue.

**Development of strategies adapted to the needs**
Many programmes fail to address the needs of the entire identified target group and as such, only a small fraction of eligible children are assisted. The main reason for this discrepancy lies in the difficulty of designing sustained community-based programmes in an environment where the provision of services by government, private companies or NGOs remains scarce due to limited resources. Some of the most striking examples can be found in the development of psychosocial programmes which focus on specialized types of intervention and lead to assistance to only a very small fraction of the children. This raises the question of the cost-effectiveness and sustainability of such programmes.

**Target group**
Integrated support to ex-child soldiers within the global framework of a programme of assistance to children who have been affected by armed conflict can be considered as a potential best practice in the selection of the target groups. Its advantage lies in avoiding stigmatisation of the children and in giving the impression that children are rewarded for
their participation in the conflict. This type of programme set-up also allows maintenance of specific services to ex-child soldiers, if required. A potential good practice can be currently found in Liberia. The programme’s aim is to address the needs of all children affected by armed conflict and includes some specific activities to foster community reintegration focusing on ex-child soldiers both boys and girls.

**Need to strengthen data collection**

The monitoring and evaluation of reintegration programmes can only be improved by strengthening data collection. It is essential to compare the estimated number of children in need of assistance with the number of children who are effectively reached by the programme. This would include, for example, a comparison of the number of former child soldiers involved in reintegration or psychosocial programmes, the number of children provided with prosthesis versus the number of children in need of such assistance. In programmes addressing the needs of children affected by armed conflict, the risk to lose track of ex-child soldiers should be taken into account in order to allow proper monitoring and evaluation of the capacity of the overall programme to integrate ex-child soldiers.

**Special protection measures for girls**

The issues pertaining to female child soldiers are often neglected in government approaches and there is a need to ensure that special protection measures are implemented to respond to their needs. Reintegration programmes must consider the provision of training or services to address the special vulnerabilities of female ex-combatants and their children, especially when the mother is a very young former combatant. Female ex-combatants often find it more difficult than male ex-combatants to achieve economic reintegration. Special measures may have to be instituted to ensure that female beneficiaries have equal training and employment opportunities. For example, funding for childcare and provision of training to women in their areas of professional interest and in the villages where they reside should be considered. In addition, female ex-combatants who have become accustomed to an independent and egalitarian life in the military may understandably find it hard to adapt to the expectations of traditional communities. Women and girls who have suffered sexual abuse or rape, have been forced to serve as “wives” or participate in violence, especially those bearing the children of their victimizers. They risk rejection by their communities and may be unacceptable to their families. Community sensitisation and special responsive interventions for these cases are called for.

Programmers should have a clear idea on how a ‘reintegrated child soldier’ would look like within a particular culture and circumstance in order to monitor the progress of their programmes accordingly. In Liberia, a centre for war-affected girls fostered with some success community reintegration by combining the re-establishment of personal self-esteem with the provision of literacy and vocational training while developing community mediation.

**Psychosocial support**
The term ‘psycho-social’ underlines the close relationship between the psychological and social effects of armed conflict, one type of effect continually influencing the other. ‘Psychological effects’ refer to those experiences which affect emotions, behavior, thoughts, memory and learning ability and the way a situation may be perceived and understood. ‘Social effects’ refer to the way in which the diverse experiences of war alter people's relationships to each other, and how such experiences change people as a result of death, separation, estrangement and other losses. ‘Social’ may be extended to include an economic dimension. Many individuals and families become destitute through the material and economic devastation of war, thus losing their social status and place in their familiar social network.

**Psychosocial programming consists of structured activities designed to advance children’s psychological and social development and to strengthen protective factors that limit the effects of adverse influences.** Psychosocial support to children affected by armed conflict cannot be reduced to psychological assistance. It is imperative to avoid the stigmatisation of the children as the only means to ensure that their best interest is taken into account. This means avoiding focusing on trauma, and instead providing support to their social reintegration, including psychological support to the ones in need.

One of the main challenges is the absence of referral structures for the limited percentage of children (usually less than five per cent) in need of specialized psychological support

As part of the psychosocial response, the capacity of the family and community to care for and protect the child should be developed and supported. Existing support structures, including mothers or other significant adult caregivers such as grandparents and teachers must be reinforced.

There is a need to identify and support traditional resources and practices in the community which can support the psychosocial integration of children affected by war. Recreational activities are essential for psychosocial well being. Recreational activities should be included in all reintegration programmes for war-affected children. These contribute to the children's psychosocial well being, facilitate the reconciliation process, and form part of their rights as children. Psychosocial programmes should assist children to develop and build those capacities that will facilitate a re-attachment to their families and communities.

**Education and vocational training**

The demobilization process should provide ex-child soldiers with alternatives to the economic enticement of war. Many will have forfeited their education and will lack economically viable skills. Provision should be made for educational activities which reflect the loss of educational opportunities as a consequence of participation including the age and stage of development of the child soldiers and their potential for promoting development of self-esteem.

Provision should be made for relevant vocational training and opportunities for (self-) employment, including for children with disabilities. Training should be based on a
proper assessment and analysis of the socio-economic context with specific reference to poverty and food and nutritional security. It should aim at identifying and building on the traditional ways of generating income, traditional transmission of technical skills, and credit and money-making schemes.

**However,** such programs are often of very limited reach and duration and are usually evaluated in terms of how many persons have attended what kind of courses and for how long. It would be much more helpful to know why some eligible candidates do not attend or complete the courses as well as the performance of those who attend. Nevertheless, the programs must be geared to the existing economy and should not raise expectations beyond what the local economy can offer to graduates of the training programs.

All economic and social reintegration programmes must also take into account the particular needs of those who will have entered combat as children but who will have demobilised as adults.

**Vocational training should contribute to community reintegration**

Skill training should not be developed in isolation from the needs of communities’ labor market and should not separate the children from their community. Traditional apprenticeship models, where the trainee is taken in as part of the master craftsman’s family, should be promoted.

Upon completion of vocational skills training, trainees should be provided with the relevant tools and, where possible, with start-up loans to promote self-reliance. *In Liberia, the CAP project has successfully integrated the provision of tools and other incentives to promote the self-reliance of trainees upon completion of their training.* On the other hand, the project has failed to address the issue of the reintegration of the trainees in their community of residence. Failure to address such key socialisation components puts the whole reintegration process of youths affected by armed conflict at risk. This particular example also outlines the limited impact of the work of psychosocial counselors when it does not attempt to address the social aspects of the reintegration of children.

**Sustainability**

Lessons from different country experiences demonstrate that when a child has been provided with education or vocational training for a period exceeding an average of six months, the financial and human resources which must be mobilized to facilitate family and community reintegration are generally grossly underestimated. This has often led to situations where assistance to the children is discontinued before the overall objective of social reintegration is effectively achieved.

**Mainstreaming**

Programmes of demobilization and reintegration of child soldiers must be integrated as much as possible and as soon as possible in programmes of assistance to children.
affected by armed conflict. The existing health, education and social services within the communities should be supported through the reintegration exercise.

**Protection from further recruitment**
This principle must be considered as one of the key priority to ensure the protection of children during their reintegration. Protection from further recruitment must be incorporated in the national legislation. Voluntary conscription after 18 must remain. Whilst stressing that it is essential to normalize the life of child soldiers, it is important to recognize that all children in a community will have been affected to some degree by the conflict. Programmes for former child soldiers should therefore be integrated into efforts to address the situation of all children affected by the conflict, while ensuring the continuing implementation of specific rights and benefits of demobilized children.

**Participation**
Participation in any process requires access to reliable information. It goes with the need to build trust and confidence in young people. The demobilization exercise represents an opportunity to inform adolescents about their rights in general and about the different phases of the demobilization itself. Programme development and implementation should incorporate the participation of the children and, with due regard, for the context of reintegration.

**Promoting a positive contribution from the children**
Ex-child soldiers and children involved in violence should be provided with the opportunity to make a positive contribution to family and community livelihood. Ex-child soldiers should also be involved as trainers and advocates in peace education or prevention programmes.

In order to be successful, reintegration of the child within the community should be carried out in the framework of efforts towards national reconciliation.

**Child soldier involvement in national or international efforts to seek truth and justice**
To the extent that national efforts to achieve justice in the aftermath of conflict involve children - whether as witnesses, victims or perpetrators - measures might be called for to ensure that they are not re-traumatised in the process.

Future criminal proceedings in the International Criminal Court might well involve child soldiers as witnesses or victims of any number of war crimes, including the recruitment of children under age fifteen and their use in hostilities. Again, the mental health implications for children involved in such proceedings must be foreseen; protective and therapeutic programmes are called for.

**Monitoring and follow-up**
Monitoring and follow-up of the children should take place to ensure reintegration and receipt of the rights and benefits. This should be developed through community resources like local NGOs, catechists, teachers or others depending on the situation. Programmes to
prevent, demobilize and reintegrate child soldiers should be jointly and constantly monitored and evaluated with communities.

**Evaluation**
It must be incorporated in programme setting. Strategies and the overall impact of the programme, for example, the social reintegration of young people, should be evaluated rather than dispersed components of it.

There is a need to strengthen efforts to document programmes, evaluate their progress and setbacks, account for and analyze the intervening impact of other factors, and follow through to learn what becomes of the children. Other country offices should replicate the example of Liberia which documented the differing involvement of the country office in demobilisation exercises with an aim of capturing the lessons learned from this exercise, outlining both successes and failures.

**Donor commitment**
Donors should take a holistic approach to demobilisation, the long-term reintegration, social healing and economic development of former combatants. The comparative experience of adult demobilisation in Ethiopia, Namibia and Uganda showed that in some instances the lower cost solution was the more effective, an outcome that suggests a successful **demobilisation and reintegration programme** ‘needs to blend into the political, social, and economic environment, has to be implemented by dedicated and professional staff, and must receive sufficient and timely financial assistance.’

13
**Acronyms**

CAP – Children Assistance Program  
CRC - Convention on the Rights of the Child  
DDR – Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration  
DHA – Department for Humanitarian Affairs (now OCHA)  
DPKO – Department for Peacekeeping Operations  
DRP - Demobilisation and Reintegration Programme  
ICRC- International Committee of the Red Cross  
LRA - Lord’s Resistance Army  
LTTE - Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam  
NGOs – Non Governmental Organisations  
OLS-Sudan – Operation Lifeline Sudan  
PKK -  
RENAMO – Resistancia Nacional Mocambicana  
UCAH – Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Unit  
UN - United Nations  
UNHCR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
UNICEF – United Nations Children’s Fund  
UNITA – Uni o Nacional para a Independencia Total de Angola (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola)
Notes


2 See Regional Reports prepared by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Children as Soldiers.


7 Additional Information:
Coalition to Stop the Use of Children as Soldiers Website - [www.childsoldier.com](http://www.childsoldier.com)


10 The document ‘Media and Children in Need of Special Protection’ is available through the media beat [http://www.cominit.com/other presentations //guidance 07.07.99](http://www.cominit.com/other presentations //guidance 07.07.99)


Bibliography


Coalition to Stop the Use of Children as Soldiers - Regional Reports

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